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All Beings are Your Ancestors: A Bear Sutra on Ecology,
Buddhism and Pedagogy

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Transforming according to circumstances, meet all beings as your ancestors. - Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091-1157)

I

Just spotted a year old black bear crossing HWY. 66 at McLean Creek, heading north.

From a distance, struggling at first to resolve its colour and lowness and lopey canter into dog or cat likenesses as it stretched up to the side of the road and across and suddenly slowed into distinctive roundhumpness...bear!

Stopped and watched him amble up the shalysteep creekedge. Wet. Greenglis-tening. Breath arriving plumey in the damp and cold after days of heat waves...been 33 degrees C. and more for four days running in the foothills of the Rockies west of Calgary. Here, roaming in the edge between prairie and forest, between flatlands and hills and mountains - here, when summers break, they tend to break deeply.

Cold rain. Cold.

It is so thrilling to not be accustomed to this sort of experience, to have it still be so *pleasurable*. Bear. His presence almost unbelievable, making this whole place waver and tremble, making my assumptions and presumptions and thoughts and tales of experiences in this place suddenly wonderfully irrelevant and so much easier to write because of such irrelevance.

Bear's making this whole place show its fragility and momentariness and serendipities.

Bear's making my own fragility and momentariness show.

That is what is most shocking. This unforeseeable happenstance of bear's arrival and my own happiness are oddly linked. This "hap" (Weinsheimer 1987, p. 7-8) hovering at the heart of the world.

My own life as serendipitous, despite my earnest plans. Giddy sensation, this.

Like little bellybreath tingles on downarcng childgiggle swingsets.

Felt in the *tanden* (Sekida 1975, p. 18-9, 66-67) in Walking Meditation (Nhat Hanh 1995).

Breath's gutty basement. Nearby, the lowest Chakra tingles with an upspine burst to whitesparkle brilliance just overhead and out in front of the forehead.

In moments like this, something flutters *open*. Shifting fields of relations bloom. Wind stirs nothing. Not just my alertness and sudden attention, but the odd sensation of knowing that these trees, this creek, this bear, are all *already* alert to me in ways proper to each and despite my attention. Something flutters *open*, beyond this centered self.

With the presence of this ambly bear, the whole of things arrives, flutteres open.

II

All Beings are your Ancestors. The feary sight of him, teaching me, reminding me of forgotten shared ancestries, forgotten shared relations to Earth and Air and Fire and Water. That strange little lesson having to be learned again: that he has been here all along, cleaving this shared ancestry, cleaving this shared Earth of ours, making and forming my life beyond my "wanting and doing," (Gadamer 1989, p. xxviii), beyond my wakefulness and beyond my remembering.

It is not so much that this bear is an "other" (Shepard 1996), but that it is a *relative*, that is most deeply transformative and alarming to my ecological somnabulence and forgetfulness. It is not just that I might come awake and start to remember these deep, Earthy relations.

It is also that, even if I don't, they all still bear witness to my life.

Relations. Who would have thought? Coming across *one of us* that I had forgotten.

Coming, therefore, across myself *as also one of us*. Such a funny thing to be surprised about again. In the face of this Great Alert Being, I, again, become one of us!

Great Alert Being, this bear. Great Teacher. His and my meaty bodies both of the same "flesh of the [Earth]" (Abrams 1996, p. 66-67), rapt in silent conversations (p. 49).

Where, my god, have I been? And what have I been saying, betraying of myself and my distraction?

III

This bear ambles in the middle of all its Earthly relations to wind and sky and rain and berries and roadsides and the eons of beings that helped hone that creek edge to just those small pebbly falls under the weight of his paws:

Even the very tiniest thing, to the extent that it 'is,' displays in its act of being the whole web of circuminsessional interpenetration that links all things together. (Nishitani 1982, p. 150)

The whole Earth conspires to make just these simple events just exactly like this:

Within each dust mote is vast abundance. (Hongzhi 1991, p. 14).

This is the odd butterfly effect (Glieck 1987, p. 17) fluttering in the stomach.

This, too, is the profound complication of all beings that is part of ecological mindfulness - that each being is implicated in the whole of things and, if we are able to experience it from the belly, from each being a deep relatedness to all beings can be unfolded, can be understood, can be felt, can be adored, can be praised in prayerful grace, a giving thanks (Snyder 1990, p. 175-185). Lovely intermingling of thinking and thanksgiving (Heidegger 1968).

So the thrill of seeing this bear is, in part, the exhilarating rush felt in seeing it explode outwards, emptying itself into all its relations, and then retracting to just that black bear, now an exquisite still-spot ambling at the center of all things. And more!

The center is everywhere. Each and every thing becomes the center of all things and, in that sense, becomes an absolute center. This is the absolute uniqueness of things, their reality. (Nishitani 1982, p. 146)

Like breath exhaled outwards and then drawn in deep draughts. This inwardness and outwardness of emptiness (Sanskrit: *sunyata*; Japanese: *ku*) - each thing is its relatedness to all things, reflecting each in each in Indra's Netted Jewels and yet each thing is always just itself, irreplaceable. Smells of the forests of mid-August and the sweetness of late summer wild flowers. Winey bloomy blush. Intoxicating.

All Beings are your Ancestors.

IV

Hey, bear!

If we are to meet all beings as our ancestors, we must also meet all those very same beings as our descendants. This odd, fluid, difficult, shifting edge point between the ancestors and the descendants is where our humanity lives.

This is "the empty field" (Hongzhi 1991) that opens and embraces.

It is also the lifespot of teaching and learning and transmission and transformation.

There are many Great Teachers.

All praise to bear and his subtle gift.

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